Whales and the Tsunami: The Reconstruction and Reinvention of the 'Whaling Town' Ayukawa

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The Whales and the Tsunami: The Reconstruction and Reinvention of the "Whaling Town" Ayukawa

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Abstract

The tsunami following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake destroyed large parts of the village Ayukawa which is known as one of only four remaining "whaling towns". The village had continued limited coastal whaling even after Japan had stopped commercial whaling in 1988. In this article, I argue that the remaining inhabitants have inextricably linked the reconstruction of Ayukawa after the tsunami with the coastal whaling operation, despite its marginal economic status. The belief of a shared history of sustainable use of whales has helped to prevent the disintegration of the town and dominated the reconstruction discourse. I argue that grass-roots initiatives like the Whale Festival or the sale of whale meat by locals have forged a common identity and reinvented Ayukawa as a "whaling town". However, when critically examining the assertation of sustainable use of whales under the *satoumi* framework, the risk of relying on only one industry for the reconstruction becomes apparent. Possible problems like the dependency of the whaling industry on governmental subsidies, the health risk of eating raw whale meat and the sustainability of the whale stocks are downplayed. Furthermore, the recent announcement of the Japanese government to resume commercial whaling in 2019 has caused further concern about the town's future. Many locals fear that their limited coastal whaling operation cannot compete with larger fishing companies in other cities should they engage in large-scale commercial whaling.

Introduction

On the 11th March 2011, the then 74-year-old honorary president of the whaling company Ayukawa Hogei, Itō Minoru, was working at the whaling station when a

strong earthquake struck the town. Since he had experienced the 1960 Chile earthquake, he instantly grasped the implications and evacuated to higher ground. The inhabitants of Ayukawa, a small fishing village situated at the tip of the Oshika Peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture, had only 24 minutes before an 8.6-metre-high tsunami hit their village. Itō and his 28 employees had to watch as within a few minutes 65 per cent of the 700 houses were washed away. When Itō saw how the whaling station and the three whaling boats had been swallowed by the waves, the only thing he could think was "This is the end of the company". However, when a few days later the three ships were washed ashore with only minor repairs needed, he found new hope. It was clear to him that the whaling station should be rebuilt for the sake of the town: "The only way for Ayukawa to live is to make use of the whales for the development of the town. The tsunami has not changed that." (Takanarita 2017: 101 f.; Suzuki 2013: 78 f.)

Despite the near-complete destruction of the infrastructure of Ayukawa, the number of victims was surprisingly low: in a community of 1,400, there were 17 dead and 6 missing. However, many former residents moved away or had to resettle in temporary housing. The reconstruction of the town is still dragging on. The first building to be rebuilt, after only one year, was Itō Minoru's whaling station. This was due to the continued efforts of many local stakeholders. Shitamichi Yoshikazu, the chairman of the Japan small-type whaling association, explained the importance of Ayukawa for Japanese whaling:

> Ayukawa was a representative example of Japan's coastal small-type whaling: a town that preserved the history and tradition of 9,000 years of whales used by the Japanese race. Should the light of whaling go out in Ayukawa, not only will the regional community collapse, but it would also mean that Japan's whaling history has come to an end (MAFF 2011: 4).

Shitamichi's bold claims helped to rally the support of policymakers for the reconstruction of the town. However, his statements are a great exaggeration. The recorded history of organised whaling in Japan goes back about 400 years; in Ayukawa,

whaling had only been introduced some 100 years previously. Before the advent of industrial whaling, as I will show in my upcoming dissertation, fishermen in Ayukawa had coexisted with whales for centuries, believing they would bring sardines closer to shore, and refused to hunt them. In the first 50 years after the introduction of industrial whaling in 1906, whaling indeed played a major role in the town's economy. But since then it has diversified and whaling has become mainly a cultural symbol. Nevertheless, Ayukawa is one of only four so-called "whaling towns" (*kujira no machi*) that continued limited coastal whaling between 1988 and 2018, despite Japan having officially stopped commercial whaling. In this chapter, I will argue that despite its marginal economic status many inhabitants have inextricably linked the continued existence and rebuilding of Ayukawa with the coastal whaling operation. I will explore how the supposedly sustainable use of the whale stock—consisting of minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) and Baird's beaked whales (*Berardius bairdii*)—is connected to the reconstruction of Ayukawa. I will show the risks and benefits of coastal whaling from the town's socio-environmental perspective and argue that whaling is essential for the reconstruction of the town from a symbolic standpoint. The focus of the reconstruction debate on only one industry has helped to rekindle a shared identity and prevented the disintegration of the community. However, as the Japanese government recently announced the return to commercial whaling, residents fear that their dependence on small-type coastal whaling might become a disadvantage as they might not be able to compete with larger commercial whaling companies, putting the future of the town at risk.

Satoumi and Reconstruction

In the discussion surrounding the reconstruction of Ayukawa, the sustainable use of whales is an often-highlighted topic. For example, the former head of the Fisheries Agency Pelagic Fishing Research Division, Ōsumi Seiji, has argued that: "Ayukawa, as a whaling town, can only be rebuilt and live together with the whales". He agreed with western concerns that a ruthless harvest of the whale stocks may lead to their annihilation, but:

> If whales are managed in the right way; their population will increase. It will be for the benefit of humanity if we can recover the mammal stock through moderate whale catches. I believe the human population will further increase, so there is no other way than to use the productivity of the ocean and hunt whales. (Ōshima and Ōsumi 2017: 30)

Ōsumi's argument, that a moderate hunt will increase the number of whales overall, is very reminiscent of the *satoumi* (literally "ocean near a village") framework developed by the Japanese oceanographer Yanagi Tetsuo (2007). Yanagi's concept is based on the popular *satoyama* (literally "mountain forest near a village") framework, which argues that the continued human disturbance of forests near villages has actually led to a higher biodiversity and net productivity. Humans have thus "improved nature" through disturbance (Japan Satoyama Satoumi Assessment 2010). Similarly, Yanagi argues that the sustainable extraction of resources in a marine-coastal ecosystem contributes to biodiversity, higher catches and human and wildlife well-being. Japanese policymakers have repeatedly insisted that the sustainable utilisation of the whale stock will increase biodiversity and help to maintain the marine ecosystem balance (Komatsu 2005). Itoh (2018) argues that, in pre-modern times, Japanese coastal whalers hunted whales in a sustainable relationship with the natural world, because of their spiritual beliefs. This is exemplified, he argues, by the many whale tombstones in Japan where the souls of the hunted animals were honoured. According to Itoh, whales were not seen as "commodities"; rather, every whale killed was mourned by the whalers. Taking more whales than necessary for the community was believed to bring divine retribution. Traditional Japanese whalers, therefore, had "an instinctive understanding of the laws of ecology from their own experiences" (Ibid: 212). Today, this traditional "whaling culture" is allegedly still honoured in the four whaling towns Abashiri (Hokkaidō), Ayukawa (Miyagi), Wada-ura (Chiba) and Taiji (Wakayama) (Akimichi et al. 1988).

Knight (2010) has however argued that the ecological impact of *satoyama* and *satoumi* is quite limited. These terms are cultural constructs that reinforce Japanese ideas of a past when Japanese peasants or fishermen allegedly "lived in harmony with nature", and are part of the "nostalgia boom" in Japan. While she does not

discredit the concepts *per se*, in her opinion they say more about how the Japanese have perceived nature than how humans have actually influenced the ecosystem. In this chapter, I will follow Knight's argument and reconstruct the role played by the discourse of a sustainable use of whales in the reconstruction of Ayukawa. My argument is that while the coastal whaling industry has never been sustainable in an ecological or economic sense, the culturally constructed *satoumi* discourse has helped to prevent the disintegration of the town. For example, after the tsunami, the remaining inhabitants of Ayukawa organised themselves in various forms to preserve their local whaling culture. Lahournat (2016) remarked that the continuation of local tradition in areas affected by the tsunami not only tied people to their hometowns but even encouraged others to return to their villages. Hayashi (2012) further showed that folk performance art was an important emotional pillar for the affected people and helped them to build a connection to their lives before the disaster. However, the fixation on an idealised past through folk-art performances can also hinder the development of alternative future scenarios. Many inhabitants hope to rebuild Ayukawa as the sustainable "whaling town" it supposedly was in the past. National politicians and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) are even willing to use monetary incentives to encourage these ideas. However, Murakami et al. (2014) argue that rebuilding pre-tsunami industries through government-led recovery policies will most likely not solve the structural problems of the periphery that existed before the tsunami. This is also true in the case of the coastal whaling industry in Ayukawa, which has been dependent on governmental subsidies for years.

In the following, I will discuss the *satoumi* framework and the reconstruction of Ayukawa from different angles. The first subchapter will look at the history of whaling in Ayukawa, evaluating the sustainability of the industry in the past. In the next part, I analyse the post-disaster situation of the coastal whaling industry to determine whether whaling is currently carried out sustainably and what its prospects are for the future. In the third subchapter, I will consider the role of whale meat in the reconstruction of Ayukawa and ask whether the reliance on this commodity is a sustainable strategy for the community. Finally, I will discuss how the *satoumi* discourse has influenced the reinvention of "whaling culture".

My research is based on fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2018. During this time, I held interviews with local stakeholders, visited the local whaling station and attended the Whale Festival. As the whaling topic is controversial, I decided to withhold the names of some of my informants. Unfortunately, the tsunami destroyed many historical documents about Ayukawa. However, the destruction also rekindled the interest of the town's inhabitants in researching their own history and continuing their perceived traditions. This has led to many newspaper articles and publications seeking to conserve local knowledge in the form of interviews, discussion groups and experience reports. I used these publications in addition to my own observations and interviews.

Ayukawa and the Whales

The first records of organised coastal whaling go back to the early Edo period (1600–1868), when western Japanese fishing communities hunted whales first with simple harpoons and later with large nets. They ate and sold whale meat, but other products like whale fertiliser for rice fields and whale oil, which was used as a lamp oil and pesticide to fight locusts, were also important (Arch 2014: 69 ff.). But in the region around Ayukawa on the Sanriku coast (see Fig. 1), fishing communities had never engaged in organised whaling, despite an abundance of whales.[1] In the ocean off the Sanriku coast, the warm Kuroshio and cold Oyashio currents mingle. This whirls up plankton to the surface, which in turn attracts fish and whales. Every spring, baleen whales travel to the area off Ayukawa on their way to their summer haunts north of Hokkaidō. The local fishermen could not make use of the whales as they lacked the necessary financial and human resources to start a successful whaling operation. Furthermore, many of them were against whaling, as they believed whales were the incarnation of the god Ebisu and would drive sardines towards the coast. They also feared environmental pollution like dead coastal vegetation caused

[1] The Sanriku coast starts on the Oshika Peninsula and runs north until Hachinohe. For more information about the history of the Sanriku region and its fisheries see also Wilhelm (2009).

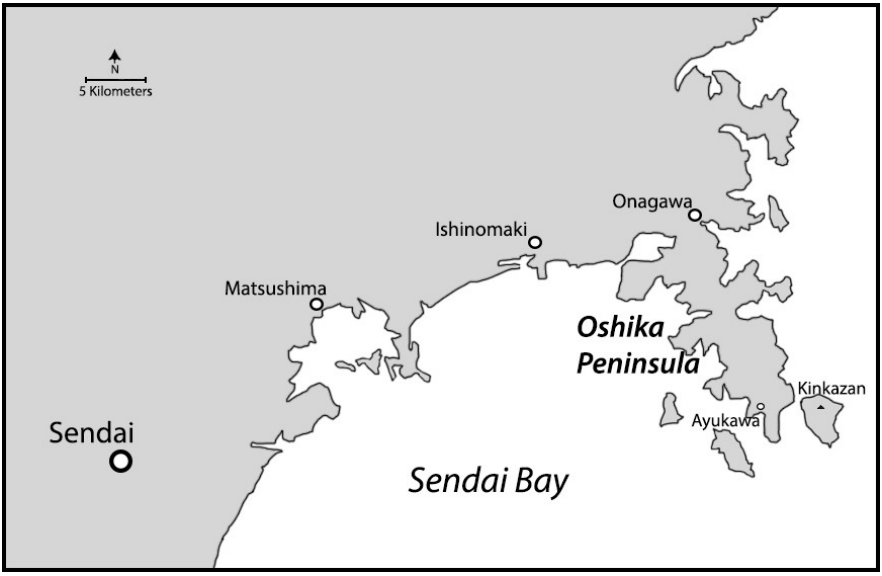

Fig. 1: Map of Sendai Bay and the Oshika Peninsula (author's creation).

by whale blood and oil leaked into the ocean (Tajima 2014: 98, 122 ff.). In my upcoming dissertation, I will argue that fishermen on the Sanriku coast regarded whales differently than their counterparts in western Japan and consequently developed a distinct "anti-"whaling culture.

After the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), new motorised ships with a longer range and new whaling guns allowed the hunting of new species such as fin whales and blue whales. Western Japanese whaling companies became interested in the sea off the Sanriku coast again, but had trouble finding good harbours because of the anti-whaling sentiments of the locals (Akashi 1910: 241 ff.). In 1906, they finally opened the first land station, at Ayukawa, where the captured whales could be flensed. Other stations along the coast were also established, but the fishermen remained antagonistic. In 1911 the situation escalated in Same near Hachinohe where over 1,000 angry fishermen destroyed the local whaling station (Satō 1987). While the other stations struggled economically, Ayukawa proved very successful.

However, the Norwegian ambassador to Japan observed as early as 1907 that "whaling will most likely not be around for a long time, as the hunting is done too aggressively and the animals will probably be extinct in the foreseeable future" (Utenriksdepartementet 1907). Nevertheless, the "whaling boom" convinced many people to move to Ayukawa, whose population grew from 477 inhabitants in 1891 to 1,135 in 1915. Most of the newly arrived immigrants came from the surrounding areas and prefectures, but some were also seasoned whalers from western Japan (Oshika-chōshi hen-san iinkai 1988: 129 f.). Suddenly, the old families of Ayukawa found themselves to be a minority in their own village. As all the newcomers were pro-whaling, the earlier anti-whaling movements were soon forgotten. Instead, the people from different regions worked on creating a new shared identity based on the sole reason they had come here: whaling.

The whaling industry peaked after the Second World War when General MacArthur allowed large whaling vessels to hunt in the Antarctic to fight a famine. Previously, the main reason for Japanese whaling had been the production of whale fertiliser and whale oil, but whale meat now became the main focus. In the 1950s Ayukawa was at its zenith and the population had grown to 3,795 inhabitants. Besides the Antarctic whaling expeditions, a commercial coastal whaling industry also flourished. The MAFF distributed whaling licences for large-type coastal whalers, which hunted larger animals like sperm whales and fin whales. The small-type coastal whalers, mainly local independent businessmen, had boats under 30 tonnes and hunted minke whales. According to the account of the former whaler Kondō Isao, the competition among the whalers was fierce and the whaling stock declined dramatically. The MAFF tried to control the situation with a quota system, but the whaling companies met in secret and agreed on their own quotas while deceiving the MAFF representatives and destroying all evidence (Kondō 2001: 336 ff.). Eventually, the whale stocks were exhausted. Sperm-whale hunting continued in Ayukawa until 1978. Fin whales in this region were almost extinct by 1971 and minke whales by 1975. Kondō concludes: "After 1950, the real number of caught whales is only known to the gods, the officially recorded numbers have no meaning whatsoever." (Ibid: 405).

Whaling companies finally adjusted to the reality and reduced their catch numbers, but with this, local jobs were at risk. Many inhabitants realised that they had become too dependent on the whaling industry and searched for alternatives. The *furusato* or "nostalgia boom" in the early 1970s (Creighton 1997) seemed to offer a perfect solution. The new "Cobalt Road" was opened in 1971 and brought Ayukawa closer to Ishinomaki. In the first year over a quarter of a million guests came to the Oshika Peninsula. Many locals, who had made a fortune in the whaling industry, invested their money in restaurants, hotels, and souvenir shops. Whale products, especially whale meat or jewellery made out of whale teeth, proved popular among the tourists (NHK 1972).

The big shock came only a year later: In June 1972 at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, a ten-year moratorium on commercial whaling was agreed. Later, this moratorium was confirmed by the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Over 600 jobs were directly or indirectly connected to whaling in Ayukawa, as well as a substantial part of the tax income (Kahoku Shimpō 1972). Tourism was still in its infancy and could not compensate for this loss of jobs; the loss of whaling, as the main attraction, made Ayukawa less attractive to tourists in any case. Without tax money, further investments into infrastructure were also not possible. To counter all this, the mayor of Ayukawa travelled to Tōkyō to fight for the survival of commercial whaling. While he and others made whaling a national political issue, they could not prevent the end of commercial whaling. At the end of 1987, the Antarctic commercial whaling enterprise was transformed into a scientific whaling programme, under the auspices of which a smaller whaling operation was allowed under IWC regulations. Meanwhile, the large-type coastal whalers withdrew completely from the unprofitable whaling business and were compensated by the government. The small-type coastal whalers were hit much harder. Not only did they not receive any compensation money, but from 1988 onwards they were also forbidden to hunt the now-protected minke whales. Instead, they were only allowed to hunt a small number of the much-less-popular Baird's beaked whale, which was not covered by the IWC moratorium (Iwasaki 2004: 10 ff.). This was also the final blow for the already-subsiding tourism

boom. Even the construction of the new museum called "Oshika Whale Land" in 1990 and the rebranding of Ayukawa as a "whaling town" could not forestall this development (Iwasaki-Goodman 1994). To support the struggling small-type coastal whaling industry, in 1994 the Japanese Government began organising scientific whaling expeditions in the North Pacific, modelled after the controversial Antarctic scientific whaling programme. Since 2003, one of these programmes has allowed the remaining whalers, who have reorganised themselves under the organisation Ayukawa Hogei, to hunt a small number of otherwise-protected minke whales and sell the meat. In December 2018, the Japanese government unexpectedly decided to withdraw from the IWC and restart in 2019 commercial whaling within its own Exclusive Economic Zone (MOFA 2018).

To summarise, coastal whaling originated in the Edo period in western Japan and was not common on the Oshika Peninsula. All ecological knowledge regarding whaling is therefore quite recent and was first introduced by the whaling industry from western Japan. Shitamichi's claim that Ayukawa's whaling represents a 9,000-year whaling history is a historical fabrication. Most of the contemporary inhabitants' ancestors moved to Ayukawa after the introduction of whaling. The extraction of whales through modern technology off the Sanriku coast has brought wealth to the community, but also destroyed the whale stocks over the course of 70 years. A sustainable use of whales has never been practised in Ayukawa. It is therefore doubtful that whaling has led to greater biodiversity and net productivity as indicated by advocates of the *satoumi* premise.

The Disappearance of the Whales

As one of the four remaining "whaling towns", the Japanese Government and the City of Ishinomaki worked hard to secure the future of coastal whaling in Ayukawa. After the tsunami (Fig. 2), the MAFF asked for money from the Tōhoku Reconstruction Fund for whaling purposes. However, journalists discovered that the 2.28 billion yen reserved for the reconstruction of whaling in Tōhoku was not intended for rebuilding Ayukawa or Ishinomaki but for investing in protection measures

Fig. 2: Ayukawa after the tsunami with one of the former whaling ships in the foreground (author's photo, 2015).

for the Antarctic scientific whaling programme against attacks from anti-whaling groups (Fisheries Agency 2011; Japan Times 2012). During a press conference, the senior vice-minister of the MAFF defended this policy, arguing that the whaling boats would dock in Ishinomaki and that the whales would be flensed there. Therefore, this was part of the plan to reconstruct Ishinomaki (MAFF 2012).[2]

A few days later, when the issue was discussed in the House of Representatives, it became clear that the senior vice-minister had not told the truth: the whaling ships from the Antarctic were not landing in Ishinomaki but in Tōkyō. Moreover, one member raised concerns that the money may not even have been intended for anti-whaling measures, but rather to repay the massive debt of the Institute of Cetacean Research, a Tōkyō-based semi-private organisation that organises the scientific whaling expeditions. Members of the opposition party, while stressing

[2] Since 2006, Ayukawa and the other villages on the Oshika Peninsula are juristically part of Ishinomaki City.

that they otherwise supported whaling in every way, criticised the MAFF for using money from the reconstruction budget for issues other than the reconstruction of the Tōhoku region:

> The truth is that whaling is not only in Ishinomaki but in all of Japan, an important culture. However, if you do strange things like this, you cause a lot of trouble. […] If you were to go to Ayukawa, […] you would see that the wharf has not been repaired and whales cannot be landed there. They can also not flense any whale or freeze and store it as there is no freezing storage. There is nothing. But even so, a large amount of money is used for whales. Can you imagine the feelings of the local whalers about this? (Onodera Itsunori, The House of Representatives 2012)[3]

This and similar statements during the debate demonstrate that, on a national level, the rebuilding of Ayukawa was linked with the resumption of coastal whaling operations. The whalers could, therefore, count on the sympathy of the politicians, but because of the MAFF's dubious financial scheme, the bureaucrats lost precious time. The locals had no choice other than to rebuild the whaling station with their own money if they wanted to take advantage of the 2012 whaling season. This placed the MAFF in an uncomfortable position as internal rules did not allow money to be paid back for something that had already been built. In the end, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry had to help, paying the whalers a generous compensation for the stocked whaling goods that had been destroyed by the tsunami.[4]

Not only national politicians and bureaucrats but also the inhabitants of Ayukawa see the whaling station as the most important asset in the rebuilding of the town. Ōshima and Ōsumi (2017: 33) argue that the only way to bring young workers to Ayukawa is to rely on the whaler network, working with the other three whaling towns. Itō Nobuyuki, the CEO of Ayukawa Hogei since 2015, remarked on the company's role in Ayukawa:

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[3] Onodera Itsunori is a Japanese politician born in Kesennuma (Miyagi) and member of the LDP. He was Minister of Defence from August 2017 until October 2018.

[4] Anonymous interview with a government official, 9 January 2018.

> Well, we are certainly not mass recruiting. But even after the tsunami and the earthquake, there are people who want to return and live here. There are no other industries here. It is only natural that the people who have lived here their whole life want to continue the only industry they have learned. As long as the [whale] stock is not endangered, this shouldn't be a problem.[5]

Currently, around 30 people are directly involved in the coastal whaling industry in Ayukawa. Before the resumption of commercial whaling in 2019, the company held a licence to hunt up to 50 Baird's beaked whales for local consumption. Furthermore, up to 60 minke whales could be hunted within the state-sponsored Japanese Whale Research Programme under special permit in the North Pacific (JARPN II). For this programme, the whalers of three of the whaling towns worked together. Each spring, they hunted minke whales in the waters off Ayukawa and, in autumn, the same number of minke whales were hunted from the whaling station in Abashiri in Hokkaidō. During the winter, some minke whales were also hunted in the open sea. Without the revenue from the scientific whaling programme, Ayukawa Hogei would not have been commercially profitable (Yomiuri Shimbun 2008). In 2017, the Fisheries Agency budgeted 506 million yen for financing coastal whaling operations, a much smaller amount than went to the protection measures against the anti-whaling NGOs (Fisheries Agency 2017: 19).

During the spring season of 2012, the allowed total of 60 minke whales were captured within JARPN II. An examination of the animals brought a disturbing revelation: more than 90 per cent of the captured whales were sexually immature (Yasunaga et al. 2012: 3). It is not sustainable to hunt immature animals over an extended period as this threatens the stock's ability to reproduce. The following years also brought unsettling results. In 2013, the whalers were able to catch only 34 minke whales, all of which were sexually immature (Yasunaga et al. 2013: 3). During the next year, the maximum quota for minke whales was lowered from 60 to 51, but only 30 animals were caught. In 2015, 19 minke whales were hunted, and

[5] Interview with Itō Nobuyuki, 28 January 2016.

in 2016 only 16. The goal of the scientific whaling programme, besides obtaining whale meat, was to gather data for the IWC that shows that commercial whaling off the Japanese coast is no threat to the minke whale stock. However, the dramatically declining whale catch and the high proportion of immature minke whales being caught indicated a different reality. The exact reasons for these disappointing numbers remain unclear. Initially, scientists thought bad weather might have affected the low catch numbers. But, when the numbers did not increase during the following years, they argued that the higher water temperatures in Sendai Bay might have caused the sand eel not to mature. Without sand eel eggs to eat, minke whales might have chosen a different migration route (Kahoku Shimpō 2014; 2015; Ishinomaki Kahoku 2016).

When JARPN II ended in 2016, the initiators announced major changes for the new programme (NEWREP-NP) beginning in the 2017 spring season, opening two additional whaling stations in Hachinohe and Abashiri (Kahoku Shimpō 2017). The Japanese Government was apparently not pleased with the continued poor hunting and feared that the figures could be used against them at the next IWC meeting. It also regarded the hygiene situation at the flensing station in Ayukawa as suboptimal, preferring the new flensing station in Hachinohe.[6] After only two seasons, the Japanese government announced, however, to restart commercial whaling in 2019, making the future of all scientific whaling programs uncertain. Regardless, the JARPN II catch results indicated that Ayukawa might no longer be a good spot for minke whaling. Furthermore, the current flensing station in Ayukawa can handle only smaller whales and is not spacious enough to flense larger whale species like fin whales or sperm whales, who might also be commercially interesting.[7]

Other industries like shore-trap fishing or aquaculture are nowadays much more important on the Oshika Peninsula. However, there is little cooperation between these industries and whaling as the unions do not work together and whalers do

[6] Anonymous interview with a government official, 9 January 2018.

[7] Anonymous interview with a local resident, 23 December 2018.

not work part-time as fishermen, and vice versa. There is no joint endeavour for the sustainable use of the local ecosystem in the *satoumi* sense: each industry is working for itself, with little regard for what is being harvested by other in the same area.[8] Nevertheless, whalers repeatedly assured me in interview that they could guarantee a sustainable use of the whale stocks. While the Baird's beaked whale stock seems to be stable, the same cannot be said for the minke whales hunted within JARPN II and the likely main target for the new commercial whaling program starting in 2019. With so little cooperation between the different local industries, it is not surprising that the interactions in the coastal ecosystem are so poorly understood. The disappearance of the minke whale stock remains a mystery, but it is one that could potentially be solved if the *satoumi* premise were followed.

The Poisoned Gift of the Whales

Until the moratorium in 1987, minke whales were mainly hunted in Ayukawa for local consumption. The local cuisine in Ayukawa specialised in preparing minke whale while other whaling towns focused on other species. As described above, after 1988, only the hunting of Baird's beaked whales was allowed and the resistance against this was strong in Ayukawa. This was probably one reason the MAFF initiated JARPN I (1994–1999) and II (2000–2016). Part of the aim of these programmes was to sell subsidised minke whale meat at markets in and around Ishinomaki as well as distributing it in school lunches. This was intended to secure a consumer base until the IWC lifted the moratorium and commercial whaling became possible again. Ten to twenty per cent of all whale meat in Japan is consumed in Miyagi Prefecture (The House of Representatives 2012). Even so, the sales figures remained underwhelming and, in 2012, the Fisheries Agency held up to 4,000 tonnes of unsold frozen whale meat from various scientific whaling programmes (Japan Times 2010).

Another problem was the risk of raw whale meat becoming contaminated with bacteria. This was seen during a food scandal in Ishinomaki that occurred shortly before the tsunami. In 2010, several large newspapers reported that, in the region

[8] Interview with Katō Kōji, 19 December 2017.

around Ishinomaki, 26 people had been hospitalised with symptoms of food poisoning after eating raw minke whale meat from the scientific whaling programme in Hokkaidō. The authorities could not determine the cause of the contamination and, as a precaution, a festival scheduled for October of the same year at the Oshika Whale Land museum (where whale meat from Antarctica was due to be sold) was cancelled (Kahoku Shimpō 2010). Food scandals discussed in the Japanese mass media often have major consequences, so it may not be an exaggeration to assert that the already-struggling whaling industry would not have recovered. Ironically, the tsunami might have saved the industry.

Only one month after the tsunami, 30 whalers from Ayukawa set out for Abashiri in Hokkaidō to undertake an extraordinary whale hunt, together with 20 whalers from the other whaling towns. The main goal was to obtain whale meat for their relatives who were now living in temporary housing (Yomiuri Shimbun 2011a). After a month, the successful whalers returned to Ishinomaki with 280 kilogrammes of fresh minke meat; but just as they were about to distribute the meat among the refugees, the local authorities suddenly stepped in. After the food scandal in 2010, the authorities were not willing to risk further food poisoning, especially considering that many of the elderly people living in temporary housing already had health problems. In the end, the meat had to be taken back to Abashiri (Yomiuri Shimbun 2011b). In February 2012, the mayor of Ishinomaki, Kameyama Kō, announced that in 2010 over 160 people had been affected by the food poisoning. This had caused additional costs to the city of over 40 million yen, primarily compensation money for the victims because the city took responsibility for the incident. The risk of allowing any further sale of raw whale meat was just too high: "To protect our citizens, this decision was unavoidable" (Kahoku Shimpō 2012a). Despite this, the city soon recommenced distribution of frozen whale meat and allowed private enterprises such as Ayukawa Hogei to sell fresh whale meat, while refraining from selling raw meat itself.[9] To reassure insecure consumers, additional tests were conducted to assess the meat for radioactivity. When no radioactive contamination

[9] Anonymous interview with a government official, 9 January 2018.

was found, the meat was sold again. However, radioactivity was certainly not the cause of the food poisoning in 2010, since the Fukushima nuclear accident had not happened yet (Kahoku Shimpō 2012b). Since 2012, the sale of fresh and frozen minke meat has continued. Also, Baird's beaked whale meat has developed a new popularity. This can be credited to the local group Umi no Megumi (Blessing of the Ocean), which sells Baird's beaked whale meat from Ayukawa Hogei online and locally. In an interview, founder Kimura Takeo explained:

> After the disaster, we lived like many other former inhabitants of Ayukawa in small, overcrowded temporary housing, without anything to do. So, we began to talk to each other and decided to do something with our idle time, so that others would also be encouraged to work. Our idea was to sell whale meat to attract tourists and continue the local whale meat culture.[10]

After some initial setbacks, the group managed to expand its product line to include minke whale from the scientific whaling programmes and fin whale imported from Iceland, as well as Baird's beaked whale, and developed new recipes (Umi no Megumi Kyōkai 2017). This attracted new customers from outside the Ayukawa community; but even so, the group was unable to sell four tonnes of Baird's beaked whale meat, which remained with Ayukawa Hogei in storage. Another problem was the distribution of whale meat to the surrounding villages and islands. Many whale meat consumers cannot do their own shopping due to age-related problems. The fresh meat, therefore, has to be delivered directly to them by sea and by road.

Whale meat plays a major role in the Oshika Peninsula communities' relationship with whales. It is seen as an important way of attracting tourists as well as of binding locals together. Its region-wide sale creates a shared whale-meat culture on the peninsula and in Ishinomaki. The food poisoning scandal, however, has shown that whale meat is not always a safe product, something that is often downplayed or ignored completely by local people. The future of the whale meat sale in Ayukawa is also questioned with the renewal of commercial whaling. In an interview, the owner

[10] Interview with Kimura Takeo, 28 January 2016.

of a local guesthouse expressed concern that now many other coastal ports might consider restarting commercial whaling and selling whale meat. Ayukawa had so far profited from the IWC moratorium as whale meat enthusiast had often travelled to the secluded Oshika peninsula for buying whale meat. If now more convenient options become available, it is unclear if the whale meat tourists would still come.[11]

Reinventing Whaling Culture

In 1953, whaling companies organised a festival to conduct a Buddhist memorial service to appease the angry souls of hunted whales in Ayukawa. This four-day festival was modelled on western Japanese traditions and was celebrated along with the *Tanabata* and *Obon* festivals. A boat race and a demonstration shooting of a live whale took place in the harbour, and dances and rituals were performed to appease the souls of the whales. The festival was a huge success and, in the following years, it was institutionalised as the "Whale Festival", remaining important even after the moratorium. Tourists from all over the prefecture participated in the activities in Ayukawa's harbour. The live whale was replaced with a mock whale, and new performances were introduced such as the hunting of the mock whale with traditional net techniques from the Edo period. These traditional techniques have never been used in Ayukawa, however; they were a form of "invented tradition", included to suggest a long whaling history in the region (Fig. 3).[12]

After the 2011 tsunami, locals soon wanted to re-establish the festival, and new actors like the folklorist Professor Katō Kōji from the Tōhoku Gakuin University were invited to revive it.[13] The first festival after the tsunami was held in 2013, in the former town centre as the harbour was still under reconstruction. When I visited the festival in August of 2017, most of the whaling company workers were away whaling in Hachinohe. In the evening, the spectators could go down to the harbour

[11] Anonymous interview with a local resident, 23 December 2018.

[12] Interview with Katō Kōji, 19 December 2017.

[13] For a first-hand report of Professor Katō's "Cultural Assets Rescue Operation" in Ayukawa, see Katō (2017).

Fig. 3: The Whale Festival in Ayukawa in the 1950s (Photo by Kanoi Seisuke, used by the permission of Katō Kōji).

to watch the cutting of whale meat; besides this, the whaling companies played a much smaller role in the new festival than they did before the tsunami. There were also no rituals for appeasing the angry souls of hunted whales. Instead, the students of Professor Katō, together with the priests of the holy island Kinkazan, performed an old dragon dance. Motifs of whales were represented on several posters, but the animals themselves were only "attending" in the form of whale meat. Apart from a small amount of frozen minke meat that was sold, volunteers and students of Professor Katō were giving away free samples of fresh Baird's beaked whale meat, sponsored by the whaling companies. As Baird's beaked whale does not taste good raw, it was cooked and various creative new dishes were tried out, for example, whale pizza, whale cornflake sticks and grilled whale meat served with miso.

The festival is one of the main events of the year for the people of Ayukawa. However, according to Professor Katō, its objective has changed: "Before the tsunami, it was a whale festival for a whaling town, but now it exists to hold the community together and bring back people who had moved away".[14] Professor Katō further explained that the Whale Festival plays an important role in the local identity of Ayukawa, even though most people nowadays have little to do with whaling. Even whale meat, the most obvious symbol of the local whaling culture, is only eaten on special occasions like this. Since 2014, a group of interested citizens, both former and current, have met several times to discuss the reconstruction of Ayukawa. They have developed a plan for a completely new harbour area, with a business district, a tourist centre where various whale products are to be sold and a new whale museum. The museum is intended not only to display exhibits from the destroyed Oshika Whale Land but also to "teach, protect and transmit the culture and history of Ayukawa that had thrived under the whaling industry in the past" (Ayukawa-hama Machizukuri Kyōgikai 2017). As in the 1970s during the "nostalgia boom", it is hoped that Ayukawa will once again profit from its "whaling culture" image. The new harbour area with the whale museum is scheduled to be opened in summer 2020, just in time for the Tōkyō Olympics. Many locals hope that with the resumption of commercial whaling a renewed interest in the four classical "whaling towns" might also emerge in Japan and tourists will visit Ayukawa for nostalgic reasons.[15] The *satoumi* narrative of an allegedly sustainable use of the whale stock in the past is used as the symbolic capital for the reconstruction of the town. Other, economically more important industries, like shore-trap fishing or aquaculture, are simply not associated with festivals or other activities and are therefore less suited for preserving the identity of the town.

[14] Interview with Katō Kōji, 19 December 2017.

[15] Anonymous interview, 23 December 2018.

Conclusion

In this edited volume, the narrative of the decline of the periphery is contrasted with an idealised image of rural Japan. Ayukawa and its connection to whales is a fitting case study. I have argued that whaling has never been ecologically sustainable, while during the IWC moratorium period it was dependent on subsidies and therefore economically unsustainable, too. Whaling was introduced to the region by western Japanese whalers approximately 100 years ago and, while it initially brought prosperity to the community, little thought was given to whale stock conservation. The industry was also not able to forge connections with other marine-coastal industries such as fisheries or aquaculture. Such cooperation would, however, be necessary to embrace the ecological promise of *satoumi* in order to achieve a better understanding of the ecosystem interactions that could explain the disappearance of the minke whales.

However, I have also argued that the narrative of a sustainable use of whales in Ayukawa has helped to assure support for the reconstruction of Ayukawa on a local and national level. From an economic standpoint, coastal whaling plays a marginal role in Ayukawa. However, the joint endeavour to rebuild Ayukawa as a "whaling town" has given many locals a new sense of purpose and, so far, has prevented the disintegration of the community. I therefore think that while Ayukawa may not be economically dependent on the continuation of whaling, culturally, such a dependence does exist. The *satoumi* framework may not reflect a historical truth, but it has helped the town's inhabitants to find a common, if invented, past. Grass-roots initiatives like the Whale Festival or the sale of whale meat through the NGO Umi no Megumi have helped to forge a common identity across the entire Oshika Peninsula. Ayukawa's attempt to preserve its former identity as a "whaling town" has given rise to a new cooperation among the locals. It has led to bottom-up initiatives in which citizens themselves try to create a future for Ayukawa. New recipes for Baird's beaked whale and other whale meat have opened up new possibilities of establishing a richer whale cuisine beyond minke whale meat. The Whale Festival is emancipating itself from the whaling industry and is becoming more than ever a

festival for the people of the community, not only a sponsored event of the whaling industry. These small changes provide hope that, even when the common goal of rebuilding Ayukawa has been achieved, new connections and ideas will emerge and develop, promoting both a physical and a cultural survival of Ayukawa that is not solely dependent on the continuation of the fragile whaling industry.

It is yet too early to know for certain which changes the resumption of commercial whaling will bring for Ayukawa. But while many inhabitants have hoped for 30 years that commercial whaling would be resumed, they now begin to realise that Ayukawa has in some respects profited from its status as one of only four remaining whaling towns. Coastal whaling in Ayukawa was only able to survive because of its small size and the strong support in the local community which only strengthened after the tsunami. However, this small size whaling enterprise that has so far been dependent on subsidies is now threatened when financially strong fishing companies begin building better equipped flensing stations at other ports.

Notes

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